

Wonder
Luke 2:8-18
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It was a very long time ago: In fact it was a long time between when it happened and when it got written down, probably around 50 years. A man by the name of Luke, a gentile by birth, was one of the earliest Christian writers, and penned a two volume work sometime around 50 A.D. - perhaps later. The first part goes under his name, The Gospel according to Luke. The second is known in the canon of the New Testament as The Acts of the Apostles. When he wrote his work he had four basic sources of information: the two existing accounts written a few years earlier by Mark and then Matthew, a third source which existed in the first century but has since been lost, known in scholarly circles simply as "Q": and finally, oral tradition - the stories about Jesus that existed at the time and were transmitted verbally in Christian circles.

The story of the shepherds is peculiar only to Luke, and we deduce that it was one of those stories in the oral tradition, because neither Mark nor Matthew mentions it. In any case, it is an intriguing and beautiful story, probably the favorite account of the birth, and the subject of countless carols, pictures and beloved Christmas traditions.

It is an intriguing story to me because it is a tale of fear, astonishment, surprise, literally "holy terror", and because - all things considered - it is a most unlikely story. Why, after all, did God, in his infinite wisdom, chose to announce the birth of his son to them? Why this band of rough, rude, uneducated, poor, dirty, shepherds? Why dispatch the "multitude of heavenly hosts" to men who didn't even know good music? Wouldn't it really have made more sense to have had the announcement heralded from a roof top in the city - or in the court of Herod - or at least on a street corner where someone could hear it and testify to its authenticity? The timing would have been perfect - what with Bethlehem bulging with people home to be counted.

Did you ever wonder why the shepherds were the first, and among the only men to know? I have, and it occurs to me that it is because they, not in spite

of their commonness and meanness and ignorance, but because of it, are wiser and more sensitive to reality than people who outranked them in all social, economic and intellectual categories: that perhaps they, alone had the ability to wonder - that is, to see the eternal significance in the common and familiar. It occurs to me that whatever it was that transpired on that windy hillside, it might never have been noticed had it happened in Herod's court or on a busy street corner. I am intrigued by the idea that the birth of Jesus Christ was revealed to and celebrated by two radically different types of people i.e. the very wise, those astrologer scholars from the East who were very perceptive in a mysterious way, and the lowly shepherds, who were perceptive in a way that was beneath - or at least - remote from all of their contemporaries.

The premise of this sermon is that Luke is saying something important in telling the Shepherd's story: that they were sensitive to God's coming among men and could celebrate that fact because they had the ability "to wonder": and that Christmas is for those who, today, have that ability.

Now, what are we talking about? What is the ability to wonder? Children have it; in God's providence we seem to be born with the capacity to be surprised and delighted with things as they are: the capacity to inspect, touch, discover and celebrate common objects - that is, to experience wonder. But most of us grow out of that, unfortunately. And it is my suggestion that we need to grow back into it.

(The following three categories of Wonder are taken from Apology for Wonder, Sam Keen)

According to a theologian who has written a whole book on the subject, people experience wonder on a number of different levels and in a number of different ways. I found three of them very helpful and would like to share them with you.

First, ontological wonder. Ontological, like demythologize, existential and the German *Welfanschaung*, is a very good word to know and use if you want

to impress a group of ministers or philosophy professors. Unfortunately, there are none of either in our midst this morning. Yet, ontological is a good word, and it means literally the study or investigation of the fact that things are.

Generally, two types of people think ontologically. Philosophers and children. Paul Tillich, perhaps the greatest theologian of this era, defined ontology which was the whole basis of his system of thought in this deceptively simple little statement: "Viewed from the standpoint of non-being, being is a mystery." That's the kind of thought that philosophers think, But it's also the kind of thought that pops up in the mind of a child who asks, innocently, "why is there a world." In fact, professor Tillich used to say that three year olds think ontologically, until we knock it out of them.

Another illustration: one time Lucy was ranting and raving about her lack of good fortune, nobody loved her, everything was going wrongly, and she concluded by saying, "I wish I had never been born." To which Charlie Brown replied, after a reflective silence, "Why, the theological implications of that are staggering."

That's ontology - to reflect on the fact that I am: that a tree is: that the world is: that the universe is. One professor of Philosophy suggests that a student should begin, not by reading the works of Aristotle or Emmanuel Kant, but by picking up a rock, any old rock will do; feeling it, looking at it, observing it - and reflecting on the fact that the rock is.

Two kinds of minds can think ontologically: two kinds of minds can wonder at the fact that an object exists: the very simple and the very profound. And if we are to grow back into wonder we need to start here.

The second kind of wonder experience has to do with the sensational, the spectacular, the unexpected and unique. The man who has never wondered at the existence of a rock, may be moved to wonder at a big pile of them - say Mt. Everest. The man who never reflected on the mystery of water coming from his kitchen faucet - may be moved to an experience of wonder by Niagra Falls.

The man who never stood alone under a night sky and wondered at what he saw up there, may be moved to an experience of wonder by a spectacular picture from the lunar surface. Ray Bradbury put it this way: "It is a good thing to renew our sense of wonder. Space travel of all of us again." (Ibid p. 23) But not all of us, really. The ability to wonder has been so repressed in some people that a televised lunar landing is regarded only as an inconvenient interruption of the soap operas: or a trip to the sea shore - as an opportunity to play Bingo on the Boardwalk with the ocean in back of you and the starry heavens above. I know of nothing sadder than the person so insensitive that even a world full of the spectacular cannot induce wonder.

Third, wonder and the familiar. In the book I cited earlier, the author suggests that, "A mature sense of wonder does not need the constant titillation of the sensational to keep it alive." (Ibid p. 23) And it is in this direction that we need to move if we are to grow back into wonder: from ontology to sensational and then back to the common, the familiar, the everyday.

Robert Hudnut, in his book "Surprised by God" includes this little vignette, "A western meadowlark is staking out my office. I can work through cars and telephones and typewriters. But I cannot work through one bird singing." (p. 115)

What does it for you? What common thing inspires you to a sense of wonder? For me it happens when, during early morning coffee a blue jay comes to the feeder: or when I listen to a Bach fugue or a Beethoven Symphony: or when I'm hungry and a hamburger suddenly tastes better than anything I've ever eaten or when I'm in my car and I see a first grader racing home from school, full speed ahead, coat half open, papers flying: or when I see a sleeping child and can't help but reflect on the fact that the child is, and is mine.

What does it for you? To be open to wonder: to be able to experience wonder in the familiar, common stuff of life, is to sense the mystery of life; it is to begin to sense that there is a depth, an order, a meaning to life not

always evident in the nature of things; it is to begin to grow back into that ability of the Shepherds.

There is probably no better illustration than human birth itself. It happens daily. It can be adequately explained. We know why it happens and how it happens. And yet for some men, myself among them, the event of human birth produces as much wonder and awe and reverence as it did for primitive men - who had no idea what was happening. There is something awesome, and mysterious and beautiful and literally wonder-ful, in that moment when "nobody becomes a somebody."

The premise of this sermon, stated some time ago, was that Christmas is for those who can experience a sense of wonder. A secondary premise is that all of us have that ability, but that most of us have lost it.

We lose our childlike ability to wonder for two reasons, I believe. First, we find ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, caught up in a pseudo scientific mentality. We live in a technologically oriented culture that dictates that there is a neat and concise explanation for everything, and that the sole arbiter of truth is whether or not it can be expressed in a mathematical equation or a chemical formula. I said a pseudo-scientific mentality, because men of science ordinarily don't think this way. It's us - the laymen - who are so enamored with labor~~atory~~ science that we become deluded into the assumption that a fact is not a fact until it can be weighed, measured and categorized.

One eminent scientist put things in perspective with this comment: "We should be so wise if we could really understand a worm." Scientists seem to sense, quicker than most of us, the mystery of the created order. But we, the laymen, find it comforting to put too much faith in their abilities - a faith they are quick to assert is wrongly placed. Consider the common faith in America that the physician - the one who knows all about us - cannot fail. Consider the distress and horror and panick - when a Doctor makes a mistake, or worse yet when he says "I don't know what's wrong."

I think part of the reason we lose our sense of wonder is that we put too much trust in science - too much confidence in the dubious assertion that all things can be explained. Albert Einstein, in much quoted words, said it this way: "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed."

I think it is difficult to experience wonder, in the second place, because of our busyness. I'm coming to the conclusion that there is nothing wrong with most of us that a little slowing down wouldn't remedy. We fill our schedules so full that there is time for little else than meetings, engagements, commitments, and travel time between. Particularly at Christmas. We've made a fetish out of being busy. We complain at the same time that Christmas sneaks up on us: we aren't in the spirit yet: we express horror at the thought that it's only 13 days away, as if it were the day of our execution. And the reason is that we're so busy preparing for it, we have no time to celebrate it: no time to reflect on it: no time to experience wonder.

The birth of Jesus Christ is addressed to our ability to wonder. On what other level can we deal with it: Almighty God, creator of the universe, come down to be born the child of a peasant maid? How else, really, to deal with this incredible suggestion that God walked among us in Jesus Christ, that he died for us, and that he is eternally for us?

"Sometimes it causes me to tremble" the spiritual confesses. And an old American folk song, popularized by John Jacob Niles says it in a way reminiscent of the Shepherds: "I wonder as I wander out under the sky: how Jesus the savior came for to die: for poor ornry people like you and like I: I wonder as I wander out under the sky."

I have a child in my home who, when I hold him and turn on a light, is amazed and surprised and delighted. He experiences wonder. I'm going to let

him teach me that this year, when I see the manger scene, or listen to a carol, or hear the story.

I commend it to you.

"And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been made known to them concerning this child: and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them."

Amen.

Father, as we make our busy preparations, help us to see - as if for the first time, the mystery of what you have done. And then help us to be open to the grace given us in every day of our lives. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.